

An Interview with
Christine Valters Paintner

Entering a Relationship with *Radiance*

Christine Valters Paintner heads Abbey of the Arts, a virtual monastery and global community offering programs and resources for contemplative practice and creative expression. She is the author of 20 books on prayer and creativity including three collections of poetry. Christine lives out her commitment as a Benedictine oblate and monk in the world in the west of Ireland. LCWR communications director **Annmarie Sanders, IHM** interviewed Christine on her insights into the radiance of God.

Q You have studied and written extensively about the mystics -- people who became the radiance of God. What are some of the commonalities you have noticed among the mystics that enabled them to be such powerful embodiments of God's light for the world?

One of the core commonalities is that early on in the lives of a lot of the mystics they had to wrestle with something difficult -- whether that was with illness or some other challenge. So, the mystics have in common the particular humility and vulnerability that can come from dark night experiences. I think of St. Ignatius of Loyola whose leg was injured and caused him to be bed-bound for many months. Out of that struggle came



the inspiration for the Spiritual Exercises. Julian of Norwich had a serious illness that brought her almost to the point of death when she had visions that she then spent the rest of her life unpacking. Hildegard of Bingen was often sick and

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illness was the catalyst for the next phase of her journey at midlife.

For me, as someone who struggles a lot with illness, I find much consolation and comfort in knowing that this wrestling is an essential part of the journey of our humanity and that it does bring us more deeply in connection with the Divine, if we are willing to go into that deep place of surrender to the radiance within. We also have to get out of our own way and become an open vessel. Then God can be at work through whatever our life's circumstances bring us. So, I believe, mystics are often the people who let the difficult experiences soften and shape them in ways that made them more compassionate and loving for the world.

Q Who are some mystics whom you would characterize with a radiance that had a particular influence on others whose lives might be important to raise up right now? What can we learn from them about embodying God's presence in a struggling world?

In addition to those I just mentioned, I also think of more contemporary mystics like Dorothy Day who was a Benedictine oblate and worked very long hours directly with people who were poor. She also had a contemplative commitment to nourishing and restoring herself in order

to continue doing her work. Thomas Merton was very involved in interfaith dialogue and, towards the end of his life, very active against war. Howard Thurman also wrote about this inward/outward movement – going inward for restoration and that deep connection with the Divine and then coming back out and finding ways to bring that radiance into being in the world.

Q In a world that values large-scale achievement, it can be tempting to believe that embodying God’s presence and love is inconsequential in its impact on the world. How would you counter that belief with what you know about the impact of even one radiant life on the world?

The dominant culture in our societies today seems to value achievement, productivity, speed, and relentless working. The Gospel helps us see the fallacy of this way of being by calling us to trust in our small actions which can include slowing down, becoming more fully present to ourselves, and listening fully to another. I often think about mystics who dedicated themselves to doing small things with great love – like Brother Lawrence and Therese of Lisieux. Brother Lawrence, who sustained a serious leg injury in war and had to deal with a lot of pain, worked in his monastery kitchen. His core practice

was being aware of the presence of God. That’s “all” he really did – and I say “all” with quotes because this practice was completely transformative for him. Therese was often sick and didn’t even live very long.

This valuing of large-scale achievement is a way of disempowering us on a cultural level. Our relationship with the Divine can help us rediscover our original empowerment which is that radiance that is already there and manifest in many small ways in our lives. We need to look for the pathway to ways of being in the world that are in resistance to what the dominant culture says is valuable or important.

Q Brian Swimme says that our task is “to become the human form of radiance” and he reminds us that we have evolved to manifest 14 billion years of radiance. What would you suggest as practices that can help us understand this call to be the human form of this radiance that has existed since creation?

When I even think about 14 billion years, my first response is to cultivate a profound sense of humility of our tiny place in the timeline of creation. While I do not want to diminish the human role in the manifestation of radiance, I feel that we sometimes enlarge our importance. We forget how much we are

an intimate and intricate part of creation itself and that we are just one aspect of radiance manifesting itself through creation.

I feel it’s important to allow nature’s wisdom and intelligence to guide us to see ourselves not as a sort of pinnacle of all that is coming, but rather to see us as humans in the midst of the cosmic unfolding, contributing to the fruition of God’s radiance in partnership. I use a lot of metaphors like slow ripening and unfolding to give the sense that we are not here to impose our will on the order of the natural world, but rather to let that radiance of the Divine work through us.

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Q If everything in the universe gives off light, what are some practices that could enhance our capacities to perceive this radiance in all of its manifestations in this unfolding cosmos?

One practice that I love to teach about is *visio divina*, which is an adaptation of *lectio divina*, and is a way of sacred seeing. I started teaching it when I wrote a book about contemplative photography. Since photography has a lot of aggressive language attached to it – aiming, shooting, capturing – I suggested that we change the language. So, for example, rather than seizing the moment, we instead receive a gift. A story that illustrates this from the Celtic tradition is of St. Kevin and the blackbird. Kevin was an early medieval hermit who was very intimate with creation and they say that he prayed with his arms outstretched.

The story goes that one day a blackbird lands in his palm and starts to build a nest and lays eggs. Kevin realizes that he cannot withdraw his hand because he is so invested in the nourishment of creation. I see this as a metaphor for how

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we can move through life. We can move trying to grab things and holding them with our fists or we can move with open palms ready to receive the gifts that come and hold them with reverence. We might do this by learning to see the world more deeply. We can pay attention to what shimmers around us. What shimmers might be what is inviting us to pay close attention. Sometimes what shimmers isn't always what is beautiful, but it might be luring us into a conversation or relationship. I think this is what is



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at the heart of the contemplative life – the practice of coming to the world with open palms – to gaze, witness, be present, hold, reverence, and then see what is inviting our heart. What is radiating? Then we spend time with whatever that is -- listening to it, being curious, not trying to impose our own judgment about it, but seeing how the Divine is speaking through that moment.

Q Seeing the radiance of God in the beauty of life around us – in the natural world and in the presence of other humans – is often somewhat less challenging than seeing it in situations of devastation and suffering. How might we train ourselves so that we perceive radiance – God's presence – even there?

I think another core part of our practice has to be making space for the difficult emotions in our lives – the grief, anger, and sorrow that come in many forms for us both personally and in the communal laments we carry. I am grateful for the recent writing I am seeing about “spiritual bypassing.” This is the phenomena in which we all engage – often in very subtle ways -- where we

try and avoid painful emotions by using spiritual concepts and language. Even when we talk about love and light, we have to be careful that we are not lifting up only light and not seeing the gifts in the darkness as well. There is a radiance in the darkness and darkness can be a holy place, a holy crucible of transformation. My experience is that the more I open myself up to those places within me that I feel are difficult and welcome them in, listen to them, grieve over them, and let them shape me, the more I cultivate compassion for others who are experiencing those same things that I meet in myself. In order to be a loving witness in the world, I have to be able to see what is difficult, and not go numb nor run away from it when looking at it feels challenging.

Q You have stated that you believe in “the revolutionary power of stillness and spaciousness, and of practicing presence to life’s unfolding” and that a commitment to this practice can change the world. Would you say more about how the world can change in this way? What has it meant for you to live with this commitment?

This question reminds me of a quote from a David Whyte poem: “what you can plan is too small for you to live.” I am definitely a “recovering planner”! I read that line years ago after I finished my graduate studies and was discerning my next step. That’s when I discovered this idea of unfolding and ripening. I started to notice how the seasons helped me pay attention to that.

When I commit to sitting in silence, when I commit to a life that is slower, when I commit to a way that has less striving and reaching and trying to prove myself – or where I simply exhaust myself – then the more life reveals itself to me and the more God reveals the next invitation in my life. What’s the next invitation which when I think of responding to it, I feel a sense of joyfulness? Where do I feel that sense of shimmering that confirms this is where I am being invited next? What is going to create more capacity within me to hold grief?

Committing to this way of being has a lot to do with intuition and letting our intuition guide us. We live in a very rational culture that emphasizes linear thinking. But using our intuitive senses can create a lot of spaciousness and openness within us to receive the gifts offered to us by the Holy.

I work with creativity and the arts and see how much that energy – which is an invitation to co-create with the Divine – needs slowness, spaciousness, stillness, and the freedom of non-grasping in order to unfold in its own time and manner. We cannot see what our path is – probably even more than a day out, if even that. We are never guaranteed anything other than that moment-by-moment learning to trust in what’s unfolding and learning to tend to those little signs that come to us through dreams, nature, conversations, or other prayer.

All of this contributes to changing the world. Those small acts make a difference – even though we will probably never know how. We have to act as if the small actions have an impact – because the other alternative is to go into a kind of nihilism and give up.

Q As a person who has known Catholic sisters for many years, what might you want to say to us about this vocation to embody God’s love and light for this world? How would you want to see us live out this call today – even as most of our communities become smaller and older?

First, I feel a lot of gratitude for communities of religious and, particularly women. You have stepped out of the mold that was created by the cultural expectations over many generations. I want to affirm the witness your way of life has for the world. We need to remember that all of us are called to do our own little part in making the world better. We don’t have to do the whole of it. We are called to trust that this path that you are on and that I am on of doing the contemplative work and working for justice in the world – even in small ways – matters.

Another thing I want to say – and it is something I am wondering about for myself as well – is how to make space to welcome in some of the younger activists in the world who need that contemplative refreshment to fuel, sustain, and inspire them. I am sure some of that is already happening among women religious, and I would encourage it. When I look to the younger generation, I feel hopefulness. I also look

at them and think there is so much that they have to do and I wonder how I can support them to ease that burden – not just in their activism, but also in living their contemplative presence. You have a culture of wise elders and I think this could be a time for the wise elders to step forward even more to share the value of their inner lives and do so with the confidence that this is what is needed in the world today and for the future. □

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